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Labor's View of the Function of the Church

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IT is my purpose in this article to try to state what the more radical and aggressive groups of workers in this country think about the Church and the function it fulfills and might fulfill in society.

There is no doubt that among these groups one may find some positive hostility and bitterness toward the churches. Particularly among foreign-speaking workers in large industrial centers there is frequently a very definite line drawn between what are called "church people" and "radicals" or "enlightened ones." The latter never expect any support from the former in labor-union work, and the former regard unions or radical political parties as agencies of the devil.

If one seeks to analyze somewhat more closely the grounds for the feeling of hostility to the Church among some of the more aggressive workers, two considerations may be mentioned. In the first place, these workers hold that social institutions are primarily the product of the economic system and exist to support it. Our economic system is the system of capitalism, under which the ownership of the means of production is concentrated in the hands of a few, while workers own nothing but their labor-power which they have to sell like a commodity in a bitterly competitive market. The modern churches are a part of this system. They depend directly or indirectly upon the privileged classes for their financial support and social prestige. Consequently, whenever conflict arises between the masters and the workers, the churches will be found throwing the weight of their great moral influence

in the community into the scale against labor. They are bound in a crisis to be reactionary. They are the natural foes of labor, and labor should look upon them as such. So runs the familiar indictment.

In the second place, not a few radical workers are hostile to the Church, or at least very impatient with it, because, as they think, the Church fixes the minds of the workers upon the next world and so distracts their attention from the pressing task of making the present world a decent place to live in. I have heard it said: "The preacher points your eyes to heaven, and then the boss picks your pocket." "Religion is the opiate of the people."

Now, undoubtedly, workers who hold the above views do so partly because they are considered good orthodox radical doctrine. Radicalism also can be dogmatic! But these workers can usually also point to events that have taken place under their own noses that seem to provide very concrete support for their views. They know how many manual workers are found in the conventions and on the influential boards and committees of the various denominations. They know how well they would fit into the life of the churches on the Avenue. They have seen a steel or mining or textile corporation build the church, and then heard the clergyman from its pulpit urge strikers protesting against a reduction in a starvation wage, to go meekly back to work, and so one could go on at great length.

It is of course very difficult to estimate how widespread and intense an attitude such as we have been describ-

ing may be. One's own views are apt to affect his estimate. I give it as my opinion, however, that the prevailing attitude toward the Church among the more aggressive workers in the United States is not that of definite, irrevocable hostility. The attitude of indifference is more common. During several years of constant association with what would perhaps be described as radical but not extremist workers, I have seldom heard an attack on the Church. Sometimes I have seen men smile contemptuously at the mention of the Church; but much more frequently have I encountered men and women who almost never gave a thought to the Church or religion, in the usual sense of the term, and who, on the rare occasions when their minds turned to the subject, thought of the Church as a phenomenon belonging to another world or planet, which might be good or bad in itself but had absolutely no contact with the interests of workers or conceivable contribution to make to their cause. For one man who was suspicious of me as a labor-union official because I had been connected with the Church, I am sure there were ten who simply could not understand how any one could possibly make the passage from one world into the other.

I am convinced, however, that this attitude of indifference is not irrevocably fixed. On the contrary, I have seen workers manifest a most lively interest in the doings of the Church. Recent utterances on the subject of post-war reconstruction, social justice, and the open shop, by Roman Catholic Bishops, the Federal Council of Churches, and other religious bodies, have made a profound impression upon the more advanced unionists throughout the land and have been repeatedly quoted and commented on in their press. The good effect of the report on

the steel strike by the Interchurch World Movement is beyond calculation. On a smaller scale I have seen the spirit of a whole mill village completely changed within a few days after an officer of a local labor union came to me and said: "Yesterday Father — told us in his sermon that a few people have too much to say in this country and that if we are men and not slaves we ought to organize to protect our wages and working conditions, and this morning fifteen spinners put in applications to join the union!"

There are, then, circumstances under which even radical workers feel that what the churches do is of some concern to them, and the actions of religious bodies obtain a quite enthusiastic approbation from them. Can we determine what actions of the churches meet with this approbation, and how, therefore, the churches may function in the present industrial situation to the satisfaction of the workers? It seems to me that two things may be pointed out in answer to this question.

WHAT THE CHURCHES CAN DO

Publish Facts.—In the first place, we have observed that workers have greeted with marked enthusiasm and gratitude documents such as the reports on the steel strike of the Interchurch World Movement or the more recent booklet on the coal situation issued by the Social Service Department of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, which set forth the *facts* about a critical industrial situation. The churches, in other words, can function today, can make a real contribution, by maintaining fact-finding agencies, national ones for all large situations and smaller ones in the important industrial center, to deal with pressing issues of a local nature, and by seeing to it that the facts when

found shall be published no matter who may be hit.

There is nothing that angers human beings so much or makes them feel so bitter or hopeless, as failure to seek, or suppression of, the plain facts about their condition, or the misrepresentation of these facts. The worker knows what wages he gets, how much his wife has to pay for the necessities of life to landlord, grocer and clothier, under what conditions he works in mill, mine and factory, what happens to him if he joins a union or goes on strike. He can not understand how anyone who really wants to know can have any serious difficulty in finding out the facts as to these matters, nor how people should not want to know such facts when grave industrial disturbances take place. Yet often he looks in vain in the public press, secular or religious, for any reference to these facts; and not seldom he finds published what seem to him deliberate and inexcusable lies, such as a report that certain strikers have been earning fifty dollars a week when perhaps five per cent of them can make that much and the rest have averaged nearer twenty dollars per week. Then there are questions concerning the capitalization of industrial concerns of all sorts, the share of the proceeds of industry that actually goes to labor, to management, to rent and interest, to profit. There are facts to be had with regard to these matters. The worker feels that all honest people must want to know the facts. Yet he finds often an indifference as to the facts, unwillingness to furnish them, suppression or distortion of them, and he becomes suspicious, bitter, or despairing. Who shall blame him?

Now in many cases the workers do not have as yet the means, financial and otherwise, to obtain all the facts, and even if they did they might be suspected of having a bias in presenting

them. The reception that has greeted certain reports above referred to, indicates that the workers believe that there are at least some religious agencies that they can trust to give the facts fairly. There are, on the other hand, large numbers of people besides the manual workers in the community, who have confidence in reports from such religious agencies, and who may therefore be aroused by them out of the complacency into which good people fall because their surroundings put them completely out of touch with the workers, and because the human imagination is lazy and weak. Thus, by maintaining fact-finding and fact-publishing agencies, the churches may render a great two-fold social service. They can serve the workers, dispelling the bitterness they often feel because of their conviction that society has not learned and will not learn the facts about their lives; and they can serve the well-meaning people in the community who today condemn organized labor or are wholly indifferent to its aims and struggles chiefly because they live on the hill and have no facts about the life of the masses who live in the valley below.

Establish Ethical Standards.—In the second place, aside from the reports consisting mainly of statements of facts about which we have been discouraging, the recent pronouncements of religious bodies that have attracted the favorable attention of the more radical workers have been chiefly in the nature of attempts to interpret Christian or New Testament ethics in its bearing on social and industrial problems. The various "social creeds" of the churches and similar documents try to point out what long hours, low wages, child labor, bad housing, industrial espionage, the open shop, the closed shop, soldiering on the job, etc., look like from the point of view of our

highest moral principles. They are thus touching upon one of the fundamental problems of our day.

Our moral selves are divided. Some are not yet conscious of the fact. Others are aware that the modern soul is sick but do not know why. Men have one standard in the home and the Church, and another in business. At home Smith is kind, considerate, patient, unselfish; he would not willingly hurt anyone. As the manager of a mine or factory, Smith deals with men as if they were pawns or pieces of machinery, he arrogantly denies them self-expression, he hires thugs and spies, he pays wages on which men cannot live decently, he lays men off the moment he can no longer employ them at a profit. To some extent the worker also has a double moral standard, one for dealing with his family and fellow-workers, another for bosses and scabs.

Now what will be the result of persistently turning upon such facts as these upon the various phases of our industrial life, the light of our highest ethical principles? For one thing, it must then eventually grow clear to all honest men and women that a system based on unrestrained economic competition, on the principle of buying in the cheapest market and selling in the highest, inevitably involves people in a double moral life. It sets employer against employer. It sets the worker to fighting his fellow-worker for a job. It sets worker and employer to fighting each other. The one buys labor as cheaply as he can, if he is to compete successfully; the other sells his labor as dear as possible and gets his wages for as cheap a return as possible. If it appear that neither workers nor employers are wicked men trying in malice or in ignorance to kill each other, that both are entangled in a stupid system which it may not be to the immediate financial interest of the employer to change

but which it is to his moral interest to change, to alter which may deprive some of individual profits but must ultimately mean increased well-being, wholeness of soul, for all, will not all men and women of good will be to some extent impelled to work together for desirable social changes? And will not some of the personal bitterness that now marks the so-called struggle between capital and labor be eliminated when the capitalist understands the moral implications of his position, and when the worker understands that the capitalist is in no slight degree the victim with him of a stupid economic order?

Again, the workers' struggle to improve their conditions and to gain increasing control over their life and work is bound to continue. Nothing can stop it. Nothing ought to stop it. If the masses of men are coming of age and beginning to think, speak and act for themselves, let all honest souls rejoice. Now although the upward movement of the workers must ultimately mean greater well-being for all, it will in the first instance certainly mean less of special privilege, arbitrary authority and personal profit for some. History makes it sufficiently clear that privileged groups are likely to hold to their privileges very tenaciously, and that privileged ones determined to cling to privilege, arrayed on the one hand, and unprivileged ones determined on freedom, arrayed on the other, means costly conflict. So long as possessors of privilege have clear consciences they will fight to the end. It is a possible function of the Church to show that the moral position of privileged classes today is not tenable, to stir up their consciences, and to remove their moral foundations from under them, by showing them what it would mean if we applied to social relations the same standard that we do apply in

many personal relations so that they may be willing to yield gradually to social change. American workers certainly do not crave a fight nor a bloody revolution, but even in America the result of blind reaction and desperate clinging to special privilege at any cost, cannot be looked forward to with equanimity.

This, then, sets forth my conception of how a number of radical workers think the Church may function in the present industrial situation. They do not ask the churches to go into the business of organizing workers. They do not expect the churches to take sides in most industrial struggles. They do not ask the churches for approval of all that labor may do. They do not ask

to be excluded from moral criticism. But they do not want to see the churches standing by indifferent or entirely absorbed in contemplation of heaven, while the devil runs the earth, or throwing the weight of their moral influence on the side of labor's enemies. They should like to see the Church find and insist upon the publication of Facts, Facts, Facts. And they should like to see the churches persistently study and proclaim the ultimate moral implications of what goes on in our turbulent industrial life.

Whatever may be the case in other lands, it has been abundantly demonstrated that in America, when the Church does these things the workers will listen with respect and gratitude.